Major Paper

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Leo Tolstoy is a world-renowned author. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is one of his well-known shorter literary works and is a great example of what a novella is. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* symbolizes psychological turmoil and what freedom from it looks like. This novella can be analyzed through the eyes of many different philosophers or schools of thought, but this novel depicts the ideals of Søren Kierkegaard perfectly. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* depicts two of Kierkegaard’s ideals: the crowd mentality and what it means to conform as well as the feeling of dread. Essentially, when we conform to societal standards and do not make choices for ourselves, we lose our individuality and become an object. Kierkegaard believes that a crowd is deviating from the truth, is negative, and not individualistic; all of which are the opposite of what humans should strive for (Kierkegaard Part 1, p. 94). In terms of dread, this negative emotion gives way to freedom. For Kierkegaard, freedom does not always mean choosing between good and evil but rather simply having a choice to be made (Kierkegaard Part 2, p. 104). To have the feeling of dread is become aware of being an individual, which frees one from the crowd mentality. In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich,* psychological turmoil symbolizes dread which can serve as a stepping stone to freedom from a life of conformity into a life of individuality and subjectivity.

In the early parts of the novella Ivan is someone who conforms to societal standards. In the second chapter, we are given the backstory to Ivan’s life. The very first sentence gives away what his life was summed up to be, “most simple and ordinary,” (Tolstoy, p. 47). One would imply that Ivan’s goal is to blend in and conform to society. According to Kierkegaard, he would not be considered an individual, but rather a “specimen” or object (Kierkegaard Part 1, p. 94). To expand on this idea further, Ivan is someone who pleases others, and he does this by “adopting their manners, their views of life, and of establishing friendly relations with them” (Tolstoy, p. 48). He does not care to have fruitful conversations or relationships with others, instead everything he does is done with the goal of climbing the societal ladder in mind. When Ivan receives a new position for work, he ultimately becomes a new person. This new version of himself is controlling, so much so that he believes he has everyone in his work environment wrapped around his fingers (Tolstoy, p. 50). According to Kierkegaard, Ivan is one who treats others as objects. Kierkegaard believes that the ideal way to treat others is to treat them as subjects. To treat someone as a subject is to treat them as an individual human being. Wrathall states that to treat another as a human being is to flourish (2015). In Kierkegaard’s terms Ivan was not flourishing and was not living as he should have. This transition into a new person through gaining a new job only confirms that he has only been a member of the crowd and not an authentic individual in the eyes of Kierkegaard. Knowing that Ivan is a member of the crowd, and not an individual, makes determining this placement into one of Kierkegaard’s spheres possible.

Ivan’s conformity to society as a member of the crowd justifies his placement in the Aesthetic Sphere. According to Flynn, the Aesthetic sphere contains those that are concerned with the immediate and are only concerned with how their actions affect the present moment (Flynn, p. 33). The individual of the Aesthetic stage does not care to think of how their actions will affect the future. Ivan’s marriage and his reasoning for marriage further implicates him as not only a member of the crowd but also a member of the Aesthetic Sphere. Ivan seemed to agree to marriage mostly for societal reasons, and he seemed to treat it more as a business transaction or a way to continue to climb the societal ladder. While he liked the woman he decided to marry, he did not marry her out of love. His wife was someone who seemed to be a good fit according to society, not someone who he genuinely wanted to spend the rest of his life with. In this regard, Ivan treats his wife as an object rather than a subject. He sees her as a means to get something he wants. Ivan is not only failing to flourish in his marriage, but according to Kierkegaard he is also failing to flourish as an individual. Ivan did not understand that a marriage takes work and would often be bothered by his wife if she mentioned her unhappiness or any other feelings about their relationship (Tolstoy pp. 51-53). Ivan has spent much of his life as a member of the crowd in which following the rules and norms of society was always his priority. Ivan fits into the Aesthetic Sphere because he never gave any thought to how his actions would affect his family, he was more concerned with the pleasure of the moment. After Ivan falls ill towards the end of the novella, we see his pleasure is instead replaced by pain.

At the end of the novella the psychological misery that Ivan experiences could be described as despair or dread. Despair, according to Kierkegaard, means there is a choice to be made. When one is faced with a choice there is an opportunity for freedom. Ivan’s choice is either to continue to torment his family by stating alive or allow himself to face the inevitable which in this case is death (Tolstoy, p. 90-91). Dependent on the choice he makes, Ivan is faced with the opportunity to be freed from his life of conformity. Ivan ultimately decides to let go of the little life he has left. By doing so, he feels a sense a freedom that is described to be a light and joy (Tolstoy, p. 91). Ivan’s choice of allowing himself to die may not seem like freedom to some, but in Kierkegaard’s terms it is. Kierkegaard believes that dread gives way to “awesome freedom,” (Stone, 2017). Ivan’s acceptance of the inevitability of death allowed for him to break free of the crowd mentality emerging from it as an individual. There is freedom in despair, and by the end of the novella Ivan finds his own sense of freedom, which is freedom from his life of conformity. Though he was on the brink of death, it was not until he gave into his dread that he was truly living as an authentic individual (Stone, 2017). This freedom he feels results in Ivan becoming an individual, leaving behind the crowd mentality, and treating those around him like subjects rather than objects.

Ivan experiences another choice to be made on his deathbed, whether or not he should acknowledge his family as individuals. Not only does he free himself and his family by accepting his reality of his impending death, he frees them and himself by recognizing them as subjects rather than objects. Ivan realizes that he had not lived as he should have. When he realizes he’s dying physically he comes to the conclusion that he’s been dead morally and spiritually for quite some time now (Kamm, 2003). Psychologically, he tried to reason with himself and claim he in fact had a good life. This reasoning did not go on for very long, he very quickly realized that he could not defend his life in this way (Tolstoy, p. 88). On his deathbed Ivan realizes the truth, his way of life could not be considered ‘right.’ In some ways it can be argued that Ivan in fact needed his death to become a reality in order to change his ways (Kamm, 2003). It takes dying for Ivan to realize his wrongdoings in both his professional and personal world. Right before his death, Ivan feels remorse towards his actions against his family which means he is recognizing them as human individuals, or subjects. When one becomes subjective, they become responsible for themselves and their actions; this is ultimately what Ivan does (Wrathall, 2015). He recognizes he had not lived as he should have, which is taking responsibility for his past actions. When his family is gathered before him, he feels sorry for them and knows he must act to relieve them of the pain they are feeling (Tolstoy, p. 90). Ivan gives into the despair he feels, accepts his fate which is death which results in his personal freedom from a life of conformity, ending instead with a life of subjectivity and individuality.

According to Kierkegaard feeling negative emotions, like dread or despair, are a part of the human experience. These feelings, like all feelings, serve a purpose. Dread is uncomfortable and often miserable, but the dissonance these feelings give are a sign that a shift in one’s life is about to be made. While for Ivan his moment of dread signaled the end of his life, dread does not always present itself in such a dramatic way. A good example of how dread can show up in many people’s lives is the choice of what college to go to, or to even go to college at all. The process of deciding on a college can be tiresome, anxiety producing, and feeling like it is never-ending, but it does come to an end because there is a choice to be made. This example, according to Kierkegaard this is dread. Following the same example, after making a choice many people feel as though a weight is lifted off their shoulders or rejuvenated. In many ways too, the choice of deciding on what to do after high school can determine whether or not one conforms to the crowd or sets off on their own individual path. When though about in this way, while dread can be overwhelming it ultimately gives us the choice to become individuals. In this way we are freed, and we would not feel this way if it were not for dread. When thought about in Kierkegaard’s terms dread can be described as a stepping stone to freedom, a type of freedom that is only gained through the dissonance that dread provides.

References

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